

## *Nydia M. Velázquez*

1953–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

DEMOCRAT FROM NEW YORK

1993–



Image courtesy of the Member

*THE NEW YORK TIMES* DESCRIBED NYDIA VELÁZQUEZ, the first Puerto Rican woman to serve in Congress, as “an aggressive woman in a macho political world, operating outside any political machine. She was born and raised on the island and not shaped by the urban edge and political culture of the barrio.”<sup>1</sup> First elected to the U.S. House in 1992, Representative Velázquez now serves as the Ranking Democratic Member of the Small Business Committee, using her position to advocate on behalf of small companies, particularly those owned by minorities and women. She is the first Hispanic woman in House history to serve as Ranking Member of a full committee.

Nydia Velázquez was born on March 28, 1953, to Don Benito Velázquez, a sugar-cane cutter, and Doña Serrano Velázquez, in Yabucoa, Puerto Rico. To support a family of nine children, her parents sold food to field workers and operated a small cinder block manufacturing business.<sup>2</sup> She inherited her father’s inclination toward politics; he often delivered political speeches on behalf of workers’ rights causes.<sup>3</sup> In 1972, she received her B.A. in political science from the University of Puerto Rico in Rio Piedras, becoming the first member of her family to receive a college diploma. Two years later, she moved to New York City and earned a master’s degree on a scholarship at New York University. In 1976, Velázquez returned to Puerto Rico to teach at the University of Puerto Rico in Humacao. In 1981, she began a two-year stint as an adjunct professor at Hunter College in New York City, teaching Puerto Rican studies. Velázquez’s start in politics coincided with teaching in New York City. In 1983, she served as a special assistant for then-freshman Congressman Edolphus Towns of New York. A year later, she was appointed to fill a vacant seat on the New York city council, becoming the first Latina woman to serve on that panel. After she lost her re-election bid in 1986, Velázquez worked as the director of what became the Department of Puerto Rican Community Affairs in the United States.

In 1992, she sought a New York City U.S. House seat held by nine-term incumbent Democrat Stephen Solarz. The newly apportioned district encompassed the working-class parts of the Lower East Side in Manhattan, northern Brooklyn, and Queens. Velázquez mounted a grass-roots campaign for the Democratic primary, arguing that a Puerto Rican should represent the new district's Puerto Rican majority. She won the five-way primary over Solarz by five percent of the vote and, in the general election, won with 77 percent of the vote. Since 1992, Velázquez has been safely re-elected to six succeeding Congresses, usually by margins of 80 percent or more.<sup>4</sup>

Since arriving in Congress, Velázquez has served on two committees: Financial Services (formerly called Banking, Finance, and Urban Affairs) and Small Business. She serves on the Financial Services Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity. In 1998, she became the Ranking Member on the Small Business Committee.

The Small Business Committee overseas federal programs and contracts that total more than \$200 billion annually, and Velázquez has used her position as Ranking Member to cultivate greater federal support of small business and entrepreneurship in her district and nationally. She has sought to steer federal agencies toward contracting with small businesses, to help owners of small firms provide medical and retirement benefits to employees, and to make federal loan and grant programs more accessible to small firms. She has been critical of federal agencies for what she has described as their unsatisfactory efforts to do business with private companies, issuing an annual "report card" on such practices. In the 107th Congress (2001–2003), Velázquez called attention to the effects of the sweat-shop industry on the working-class poor in her district. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, she introduced legislation that required the hiring of small businesses to help cleanup and reconstruct lower Manhattan.

Velázquez also has a keen interest on immigration matters and U.S. foreign policy in the Caribbean. Much of her district casework centers on immigration issues, as many of her constituents have family in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and other Caribbean countries. She has worked for increased funding to reduce the immigration backlog at the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services. Velázquez has consistently advocated ending practice bombing on the navy's test range at Vieques, an island just off the Puerto Rican coast, and advocated for liberating former Puerto Rican political prisoners. In 1994, she protested the William J. Clinton administration's policy of refusing Haitian refugees entrance into the United States.<sup>5</sup>

## FOR FURTHER READING

*Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress*, "Nydia Margarita Velázquez," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

## NOTES

- 1 Deborah Sontag, "Puerto Rican-Born Favorite Treated Like Outsider," 2 November 1992, *New York Times*: B1.
- 2 "Velázquez, Nydia Margarita," *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 2nd ed., Vol. 17 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1998); *Politics in America*, 2004 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2003): 705.
- 3 Maria Newman, "From Puerto Rico to Congress, a Determined Path," 27 September 1992, *New York Times*: 33.
- 4 Newman, "From Puerto Rico to Congress, A Determined Path"; "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/index.html>.
- 5 "Nydia Velázquez," Associated Press Candidate Biographies, 2000; Douglas Jehl, "Clinton's Options on Haiti: Ever Harsher Choices Ahead," 6 May 1994, *New York Times*: A10.